

# PROMISING PRACTICES



## Rethinking Services in an Era of Reform and Redesign

A few years ago, CARF's Employment and Community Services (ECS) customer service unit began to gather observations of exemplary practices during accreditation surveys. The purpose of this effort was to help answer the often-asked question our ECS staff receives: "Do you know somebody that does a good job of..." and to engage providers in learning and teaching each other how to establish and improve their services in creative and customer-driven ways.

An inspiring number of often delightful exemplary practices are being collected in the ECS database, and staff has had the opportunity to select some for publication as *Promising Practices* articles. Those chosen for articles are based on several factors, including that the practice cited is "customer driven" in design and that it helped the organization to address a serious threat or issue, provided a blueprint for new design of services, responded to an opportunity to expand services, or redesigned business practices to better support services.

The foundation for successful business and service delivery is continuous learning and change in response to the pressures and opportunities of communities and service systems. *Promising Practices* articles of exemplary citations from CARF survey reports are intended to help service providers learn from each other and share their insights.

Minnesota Rehabilitation Services staff member Anita Kavitz and her colleagues facilitated just that at a conference in June 2009. Recognizing the pressures that their partners in the provider world are facing, the state staff had taken time to review the recent CARF survey reports--looking for exemplary practices that may help other providers in the state to reconsider their services, their management, and their relationships with their communities, as well as provide the energy and social capital needed to solve problems and meet the needs of citizens with disabilities or other challenges.

Brought to you by the  
ECS customer service unit at

carf

Volume 5, Issue 3  
October 2010

---

### Putting Out the Good Word: Some Information about the Promising Practices Series

We are offering a series of short articles on a variety of promising practices that CARF surveyors have observed during surveys from 2004 to the present. There is no particular order that we will follow in presenting this series of short reports. The purpose is not to rate one organization over another, but to encourage U.S. and Canadian community providers to dialogue with one another and to encourage creative solutions to individual service designs and organizational business practices and thereby achieve effective and positive results in each organization's community.

Although there are indeed a number of ways to approach conformance to a standard, what makes organizations given an

It is CARF's pleasure to introduce the following four brief but thoughtful and inspiring articles written by provider organizations in Minnesota. All are designed to give a peek into new programs or new ways of doing business, and, above all, to position services in partnership with funders in an era of reform and redesign.

## **Midwest Special Services, Inc.**

With 60 years of experience serving people with a wide range of disabilities, Midwest Special Services, Inc. (MSS), located in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota, knew a thing or two about what worked when it came to producing positive outcomes for clients in a traditional day program setting. However, when Dakota County Human Services approached the organization about developing a program for adults with autism, it was time to put aside tradition and focus on the specific and unique challenges faced by this population. Thus began the Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) Program for Adults, the first CARF-accredited autism program in Minnesota and only the second in the country.

The ASD program began in a small program room out of MSS' Burnsville, Minnesota, center, and, within a year, plans were underway to build a new facility. It had to meet the needs of both the ASD and traditional programs. The new site, located in Apple Valley, Minnesota, was designed with the specialized needs of people with ASD in mind, paying close attention to items that many adults with ASD struggled with on a daily basis, such as sensory issues, distraction levels, and difficulty with transitions.

Sensory needs are addressed daily in many formats: a large gymnasium provides opportunities for gross motor activities, such as bowling, swinging, and other active games; a multisensory room provides opportunities for relaxation or stimulation of all the senses; the garden room encourages hands-on gardening, enjoying the smell of fresh herbs or the gentle hum of a hydroponic system; therapy balls replace chairs in many rooms for individuals who prefer bouncing to sitting; and small sensory bins are accessible for each person, depending on his or her individual sensory needs or preferences. Program rooms were designed to provide minimal distractions, including limiting or omitting windows and equipping rooms with dimmer switches to control lighting that may be distracting to some.

Key to the program's success is the emphasis on facilitating transitions. Transitions are built into each day, and all individuals transition through many different rooms/activities throughout the day, including a variety of community-based work/volunteer and leisure/recreation activities. Transitions occur every 30 minutes and are preceded by auditory and visual cues, which allow individuals to prepare for the upcoming change. This process has facilitated easier transitions during the program day and has reportedly impacted the home lives of these individuals as well.

exemplary rating stand out is their professional and strategic response to an observed service or business need, always designed with input from their stakeholders and based on those individuals' quality expectations.

We hope you enjoy the series. We encourage you to contact the identified representative in the article to get more information about their services.

---

## **Promising Practices issues now archived online!**

Do you remember a past article that you'd like to forward on to a colleague? Did you just join Promising Practices and want to see issues we covered in the past? Well, now you can! Old issues of Promising Practices are now available online. Find archived issues at [www.carf.org/newsletter](http://www.carf.org/newsletter) and follow links to past issues. Past issues are categorized by topic so you can easily find articles of interest.

Several families have reported that they have noticed an increased tolerance to change, as well as more flexibility in daily routines, attributing these skills to the number and frequency of transitions that occur during the program day.

Everyone in the program works closely with the staff to set up a daily picture schedule, outlining where and when transitions will happen and any other activities or outings that may occur. Social stories are available to assist with difficult situations, and "All About Me" books are written for each person in the program, outlining things such as likes and dislikes, behavioral triggers, and communication barriers.

All staff members receive extensive training on ASD-related topics, and a resource binder is available for staff to learn about the many aspects and complications of ASD. For a little added inspiration, it includes news stories/articles about people with ASD doing extraordinary things. A resource binder also exists for families and individuals with ASD, providing information and contacts on topics such as advocacy, medical specialists who work specifically with individuals with ASD, and many other services. A parent support group meets monthly, and picnics and gatherings are held throughout the year to allow families to connect, network, and share additional resources with each other.

Although intense, the organization and structure of the ASD service delivery model have been a great success. Individuals in the program and their families have reported positive changes and growth since the program began. The program was recently expanded to another MSS site, located in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, and plans are underway to incorporate some of these techniques at the St. Paul site, where a supported employment program and several community work sites are currently employing individuals with ASD.

Future expansion plans also include offering specialized vocational rehabilitation services for individuals on the higher functioning ranges of the spectrum and individuals with Asperger's Syndrome. MSS' more traditional and currently CARF-accredited vocational rehabilitation services will be modified to address the specialized needs of these individuals and will also include a social skills group component. The social skills group will be designed to assist the participants as they learn to better understand the social environments associated with postsecondary education and the workplace to greatly increase their likeliness of success.

For further information about Midwest Special Services, Inc., please contact Anna MacIntyre, Director, Rehabilitation Services, at (651) 778-1000 (main) or (651) 793-4118 (direct).

## **Courage Center's Volunteer Services Department**

Courage Center's Volunteer Services Department is known for its strong, cutting edge volunteer program that is part of the fabric of Courage Center. This department has more than 2,200 annualized volunteers (ambassadors) who support Courage Center's programs and services, share its story, or create opportunities to do so. In 2008, volunteers provided more than 74,000 hours of services at a value of more than \$1.5 million. Last year, 2,248 annualized volunteers provided 89,000 hours of service valued at \$2 million. The staff leaders of the department have more than 115 years of combined experience at Courage Center and in volunteer management.

The department also strives to follow the principles and value propositions outlined in Jim Collins' book, *Good to Great*. Collins says, "Greatness is a matter of conscious choice and discipline." The Volunteer Services Department at Courage Center truly chooses to be a "world class" department.

To achieve its goal of being world class, the department identified five key components:

- Organizationally aligned goals.
- Leadership development.
- Maintaining level of volunteer strength.
- "Best practices" in volunteer management.
- Cultivating community relationships.

Annually, the Volunteer Services Department aligns its goals with Courage Center's organizational goals and strategies. The Volunteer Services Department is deeply passionate about enriching Courage Center's services and leadership with committed and trained volunteers, and it is among the best in the world at recognizing and connecting volunteers to opportunities that fit their skills, talents, and passions to benefit Courage Center.

Leadership development for staff and volunteers is critical to Courage Center and to its Volunteer Services Department. The department has a comprehensive system for training and managing a large number of volunteers serving in many diverse areas. Each year, goals focus on maintaining this strong program and developing new initiatives to support future trends in volunteerism, including utilization of skill-based volunteers in critical areas of need and expanding leadership development to ensure that this rich resource can perform at the highest level of effectiveness.

The department continues to develop initiatives and strategies that allow it to stay current and viable and to capitalize on volunteer talent, as well as attract the new wave of volunteer talent: skill-based volunteers. This entails creating experiences meaningful to volunteers that develop their skills, demonstrate impact, and tap into the volunteers' interests and passions.

Finally, it is critical for the department to maintain its focus on community outreach to key stakeholders, including donors, corporations, professional groups, and healthcare organizations, in order to cultivate the strong relationships needed to ensure that its story is told and that its needs are clearly identified and recognized. These relationships support and enhance not only volunteer efforts, but also the Courage Center mission.

For further information about Courage Center, please contact Gail Peterson, Director of Volunteer Services, at (763) 520-0213 or [gail.peterson@couragecenter.org](mailto:gail.peterson@couragecenter.org).

## **Opportunity Partners: Building an entrepreneurial spirit through self-employment**

Four years ago, Julie was busy with her job and enjoying life, especially her favorite hobbies such as reading and spending time with her grandchildren. A hard worker her entire life, Julie had held a variety of jobs--as a caterer, a home cleaner, and a senior caregiver.

But after a bout with inner ear disorder Meniere's Disease resulted in permanent and profound hearing loss, Julie felt confused and lost, unsure what career path she could take next.

For Julie, losing her hearing was both devastating and debilitating. She had changed, yet she was still the same hard-working person she had always been. "For a long time, with the hearing loss, I thought, 'It's over,'" she said. "But I'm still here; it's still me inside."

The difficult part was convincing others to give her a chance.

Now, with the help of a CARF-accredited Opportunity Partners program that fosters supported self-employment for persons with disabilities, Julie is on her way to becoming a business owner. She's gaining experience and knowledge to launch her own business providing in-home care for seniors.

Based in the Minneapolis area, Opportunity Partners is a nonprofit organization serving 1,500 persons with disabilities each year through a wide variety of employment, training, and residential programs. Opportunity Partners earned recognition from CARF for its vision and design of services relating to employment opportunities.

Through the Supported Self-Employment program, which is believed to be the only program of its kind in Minnesota, Opportunity Partners is currently working with individuals with disabilities who are pursuing the following careers:

- Personal chef/caterer.
- Nature-friendly cleaning services.
- Carpenter/contractor.
- Artist.

Yoga instructor for persons with disabilities.

"We're working every day to redefine disability through our innovative programs that help people with disabilities achieve greater independence," said Justina Cloutier, vocational services manager at Opportunity Partners. "I am very excited to think about the possibilities for individuals starting their own business. It's just one more way for people to have meaningful work and become self-sufficient."

### **Supported Self-Employment Background**

In 2007, a task force of Opportunity Partners' board members and senior management was formed to look at self-employment options. After researching self-employment programs throughout the country, the task force chose a Supported Self-Employment model that assists individuals with disabilities through the entire process of starting a business-- personal assessment, feasibility, business planning, marketing, technical assistance, and mentoring. The Supported Self-Employment program launched in May 2008.

Opportunity Partners was awarded a \$10,000 grant from The CCP Foundation to develop the curriculum for the self-employment exploration class for persons with disabilities. Through the exploration class, participants uncover interests and passions for self-employment, learn business planning basics, test business ideas, and tour small businesses.

Upon completion of the class, participants work one-on-one with the program coordinator, Philip Koffel, to define strengths and weaknesses, develop a business idea, identify barriers, and craft a business plan. After the business plan is developed and start-up capital is secured, Opportunity Partners continues to assist with technical assistance and problem solving, as needed.

In addition to Supported Self-Employment, Opportunity Partners also offers more traditional employment programs.

**Center-based Employment**--Opportunity Partners has partnered with businesses for more than 50 years in providing contract packaging and assembly, and it has recently ventured into new industries such as dry foods packaging and medical company kitting.

**Competitive Job Placement**--Opportunity Partners' experience in job development and relationships with hundreds of employers allow the organization to provide access to jobs representing nearly every interest and skill level.

**Job Coaching**--To help ensure long-term employment success, Opportunity Partners' support continues well after a job has been attained, providing support services tailored to meet each employee's individual needs.

**Supported Employment Teams**--Currently Opportunity Partners has

more than 40 teams, employing nearly 400 people with disabilities working throughout the Minneapolis area.

**Vocational Evaluation**--Opportunity Partners has a waiting list for its highly popular vocational evaluations, which are conducted at companies throughout the community. Detailed assessments of vocational assets and challenges are provided and include valuable feedback from employers and recommendations for achieving an individual's employment goals. Employers provide valuable feedback regarding work habits, work skills, and physical capabilities.

For more information on Opportunity Partners, please contact Justina Cloutier at (952) 938-5511 or [jcloutier@opportunities.org](mailto:jcloutier@opportunities.org) or visit [www.OpportunityPartners.org](http://www.OpportunityPartners.org).

## **Business Partner Council Opens Employment Doors**

From three service locations in the Twin Cities to offices in central Minnesota (St. Cloud) and northeast Minnesota (Duluth), the Minnesota Resource Center (MRC) has learned that its success depends on the strength of its business partner council. Every aspect of each service centers on these relationships, from the development of new skills training courses for individuals with disabilities to the hiring of program participants.

This is especially true for its CARF-accredited and licensed skills training courses for adult learners, where more than 70 business partners statewide work together with MRC staff to develop, enhance, and redesign the training courses to fit the hiring needs of Minnesota businesses. The focus on training is twofold, with equal emphasis on technical skill building and interpersonal/workplace skill development and enhancement, because without strong communication skills, individuals with and without barriers often find it difficult to remain employed.

The strong tie to business partnerships began for MRC back in the early 1970s with its first Department of Education Projects With Industry Grant. It was strengthened further in 1985 when MRC was offered the opportunity with funding from IBM® to train individuals with disabilities for high-tech computer careers. The model brought together business and rehabilitation and opened the employment door for many individuals with disabilities.

MRC staff continues to enhance its relationships with business through a structured process of building and then maintaining relationships. The process first introduces new business partners to the goals, expectations, and benefits of becoming a business partner during an hour-long orientation. Once on board, business partners are asked to share their expertise by facilitating work-readiness training sessions, conducting mock interviews, or serving on one of many subcommittees. It is the consistent

communication that keeps business partners involved, and they also understand the importance of their volunteerism by hearing success stories at quarterly meetings or reading articles published by MRC.

MRC business partner council member Smith Micro Technologies received the Business Partner of the Year Award at the Association of Rehab Programs in Computer Technology (ARPCT) Conference two years ago. An excerpt from the nomination clearly shows how active business council members are:

*Smith Micro Technologies, a technical support outsourcing company located in St. Paul, has been a member of the MRC Information Technology Business Advisory Council since 1999. In that time period, it has been extremely active in developing job shadows for the students graduating from the MRC Computer Technician Training course, as well as looking for permanent employment in the technology field for those same students. Nancy Zylla has also taken an active role as an MRC business advisory council member, facilitating training sessions in the areas of customer service and employer expectations.*

*It is through long- and short-term assignments that the graduates have had the opportunity to work at companies such as Best Buy® and 3M. Not only do they believe in hiring those graduates who demonstrate high technical and workplace skills, but they also work extremely hard to secure assignments for graduates whose disabilities may hinder them from finding employment. From the company president and owner down the ranks, the company philosophy is an open door for hiring based on skills first and barriers second!*

*Marcus is one of those individuals. He came to MRC and enrolled in the MRC Computer Technician Training course in 2004. Marcus is extremely bright and took to the training immediately. Marcus lives with Asperger's Syndrome and Tourette syndrome with very evident symptoms, including ticks and inappropriate speech. The positive attitude that Marcus brought to class each day was infectious though, and staff became very comfortable with the symptoms and focused on the building of his skills instead.*

*Marcus graduated with ease, and placement services began. Marcus lives in a group home, so the job search had to be limited to locations that had public transportation available. It was also difficult for MRC placement staff to explain the disabilities Marcus lives with and the symptoms that would be seen in the workplace so employers would understand and look beyond the barriers to see the technical wizard before them. After several months of negative experiences, MRC approached Smith with a request. Would they help find a job for Marcus?*

*The wheels began to turn, and, before long, Marcus was employed through Smith Micro Technologies assigned to a job as a computer technician at 3M. His responsibilities include personal computer software and hardware configuration and troubleshooting. There he worked in a*

*team environment with other Smith Micro Technologies and 3M employees, where his co-workers found his positive attitude and smile something they looked forward to each day!*

*Smith Micro Technologies is a true partner in finding employment for individuals with disabilities and, in doing so, also finds the gifts those individuals bring to the job!*

It takes work and commitment by MRC staff to make the business council strong and vibrant, but it is well worth the effort with end products that include quality programs and services and competitive employment for individuals with disabilities.

For more information on MRC and its programs, please call Kim Feller at (612) 752-8102.